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Listening Versus Skimming: What White Hip Hoppers at Vassar College Learn or Overlook When they Listen to Rap

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Vassar College

**Listening Versus Skimming:
What White Hip Hoppers at Vassar College
Learn or Overlook When they Listen to Rap**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

by

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April 2013

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What White Hip Hoppers at Vassar College Learn or Overlook When they Listen to Rap**

Hip hop has emerged over the last forty years as a diverse and dynamic musical genre as well as a youth subculture that spans across race, gender, sexuality, and class and has taken over mainstream popular culture in the United States. My thesis will focus on the consumption of hip hop music (or rap) by affluent white listeners. I argue that hip hop contains resistant or anti-hegemonic themes in its lyrics, but that they are often couched or hidden. I attempt to identify the degree to which white listeners recognize these themes and engage with hip hop as active, critical listeners. Using data that I collected from over twenty surveys and six interviews from white hip hop fans at Vassar College, I explore how hip hop influences their conceptions of self and racial ideologies. I contend that most listeners operate under varying degrees of a color-blind ideology when they interpret and engage with hip hop content. However, many also utilize hip hop as a tool to better understand racial inequality and hierarchy. This thesis begins to unpack and conceptualize the processes involved in developing these complicated and seemingly contradictory understandings of hip hop and the centrality of race.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 –The Landscape: Historical and Socio-Political Context of Hip Hop.....	7
<i>History of Hip Hop in Brief.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Socio-Political and Theoretical Backdrop.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>20</i>
Chapter 2 – The Issues: White Consumption, Performers, and Political Potential.....	21
<i>Possible Meanings of Consumption.....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>White Rappers.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>White Consumption of Black Culture.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Methods.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>34</i>
Chapters 3 – Learning from Hip Hop: What We Hear When we Listen.....	35
<i>Learning from Hip Hop.....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Learning about Blackness vs. Learning about Social Structure.....</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>Learning about Language: creativity as social commentary.....</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>Learning from Each Other.....</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>47</i>
Chapter 4 – Learning with Hip Hop: Hip Hop and the Academy.....	48
<i>Working Together: Vassar education and hip hop.....</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Maintaining Color Blindness.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Hip Hop in the Academy.....</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>57</i>
Concluding Remarks.....	59
<i>Relevance.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Thoughts for the Future.....</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>Further Research.....</i>	<i>63</i>
<i>Zooming Out.....</i>	<i>64</i>
Epilogue and Reflections.....	66
Appendix A – Survey Questionnaire.....	67
Appendix B – Interview Questions.....	69
Bibliography.....	71

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Introduction

Motherfuckers say that I'm foolish, I only talk about jewels
Do you fools listen to music or do you just skim through it
See I'm influenced by the ghetto you ruined
That same dude you gave nothing, I made something doing
--Jay-Z, *Renegade*, 2001

Rich kids go and cop *The Source*
They don't know about the blocks I'm on
--Nas, *Got Yourself a Gun*, 2001

The first of these two epigraphs speaks to a disconnect that rapper, Jay-Z, feels exists between what he is saying in his music or the messages he is trying to get across and what his audiences and critics are hearing. To detractors (or “haters” as Jay might call them) who claim that Jay-Z is strictly a hedonistic, consumerist rapper, he points out that his success after coming from nothing justifies his celebration of consumption now (a theme he revisits in one of his most famous songs, “99 Problems” as well as others). Moreover, he points out that the themes and subjects he deals with in his songs are a reflection of his upbringing in the urban ghetto of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Anyone who does not recognize the importance of giving this previously invisible and marginalized population some kind of voice through his music must simply “skim through it.” He views himself as a role model because he was able to achieve upward mobility despite the barriers of his racial and socio-economic background, and he is telling the stories of people with similar backgrounds. This is clearly more than just “jewels” or hedonistic consumption.

The second epigraph speaks more directly to what population might be misinterpreting lyrics or divorcing them from their social context. More affluent listeners who consider

themselves serious hip hop fans because they read rap magazines like *The Source* cannot fully understand the content because they do not know about the roots of the music or the circumstances that many hip hop artists (Nas and Jay-Z included) came from. Both of these quotations seem to imply that to truly understand or hear what a rapper is saying requires a great deal of effort and active participation on the part of the listener. Whether this means listening closely to a rapper's whole body of work and revisiting certain passages to try to decode them, or even doing outside research to gain some knowledge or appreciation of where he is coming from or what he might be referencing, one cannot simply skim through and expect or profess to understand.

One of the students that I interviewed for this project discussed this depth and complexity of meaning and interpretation within rap lyrics. Part of rapping as a lyrical and poetic form involves re-using and referencing older lyrics, tropes or aphorisms and altering their meaning or function to create a new statement or idea. In this way, rap lyrics mimic the musical style of hip hop beats or instrumentals in which samples, clips or sound bites from older songs—or even found sounds that are not musical—are re-appropriated and woven in as a part of a new and completely different composition. Particularly with the best rappers, (and Nas and Jay-Z are widely considered to be some of the greatest of all time) it requires multiple listens over time to truly grasp everything that is being said, and even still, the listener may be missing certain aspects or potential interpretations:

“Good rappers make me hear a line that's a reference to an existing trope and then revisit it later or hear it on the eighth listen and be like ‘nah, that's what he meant is this way’... I still hear lines that I didn't really understand and understand them in a new light and to me that's just cause of the nature of the art form. It really allows for a huge amount of depth” (James).

I chose my title for this thesis, not simply to reference a clever rap lyric, but also to stress that there are two possible ways to engage with rap (or really any art form). One can actively engage

with it and seek an understanding of deeper meanings (for which James, Jay-Z and Nas seem to advocate), or simply appreciate it from a more aesthetic and surface level.

This thesis will focus on the consumption of and participation in hip hop music and culture of young affluent whites in the United States. Specifically, I will be looking at how white hip hop fans (and a few aspiring artists) at Vassar College (Poughkeepsie, NY) view and understand hip hop, looking at their impressions of themes and content in rap lyrics and their role within the subculture¹. By examining the impact hip hop has had on their lives and conceptions of self, I attempt to assess their understanding of race relations and their own whiteness. I used survey and interview questions that I designed as the primary data for this investigation. The questions seek to unpack the processes and conceptualizations that lead these listeners to engage actively or passively with hip hop. Through investigating these processes, I hope to gain insight into my subjects' racial ideologies and how they are influenced by and reflected in their consumption of hip hop. Particularly, I will determine whether they follow the dominant ideology of color-blindness or have a more progressive comprehension of white privilege and persisting racial hierarchy. In this way, I may comment on the state of racial discourse and politics for young white hip hoppers and postulate about hip hop's potential to influence the future of such politics.

My interest in this topic stems from my own personal journey with hip hop. For the majority of my youth I accepted media representations and my parents' proclamations that rap and hip hop culture was vulgar, violent, criminal, and misogynistic. I rarely listened to rap of my

¹ Although hip hop describes a culture that includes the four pillars of rapping or emceeing, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti art (as well as many other aspects, depending on who you ask, that might include style or fashion, speech or slang, how one carries oneself, a style of walk, or even a form of knowledge), this thesis will be focusing on the musical side of hip hop—particularly rap or emceeing. That said, I may often use the words rap and hip hop interchangeably throughout this thesis.

own volition, and when I did, it was only a select few non-mainstream rap artists. When I got to college, I began to develop a more critical understanding of social dynamics and inequality from the sociology courses I was taking. Meanwhile, new friends I was making were introducing me to a much broader world of hip hop than I previously knew existed. This concurrence resulted in my shocking realization that the two formally opposite fields were often interrogating many of the same subjects (such as structural inequality, white privilege, social power dynamics etc.), albeit with a highly different lexicon.

Sociology as a form of knowledge is an accepted and generally respected discipline due to its history based in white intellectualism. Hip hop, on the other hand, with its inherent blackness and roots in black urban culture, is derided and often blamed for a wide array of societal issues. Even though the two fields often interrogate, and I would argue, seek to educate about, similar subjects, they are viewed in completely different terms. A possible interpretation of this phenomenon might be that privileged whites are allowed to learn about inequality and social dynamics as long as it is within the ivory tower of the academy. However, underprivileged urban minorities must remain ignorant, lest they recognize the injustice of their position and attempt to upset the status quo. The relationship between a hip hop education and a college education will be expounded upon further in chapters three and four. My original interest in doing a project like this was to try to determine if my experience was a common occurrence amongst white hip hop fans. Particularly, were other hip hoppers who were receiving a college education viewing rap as a kind of Sociology for the masses (to put it crudely) and how might this understanding be replicated in order to utilize hip hop as a tool to improve racial discourses and achieve greater social equity?

The following two chapters will provide the context as well as a more detailed framing for my project. In the first chapter, I begin by providing a brief outline of the history of hip hop, focusing on its roots and how it came to be consumed by whites in the first place. This will be followed by an explanation of the state of current racial politics as I understand them as well as the theoretical underpinnings that inform this perspective. After seeing the brief sketch of hip hop's birth and growth and inevitable interaction with white audiences as it invaded mainstream popular culture, we will focus on the importance of whiteness and color blind ideology in terms of how most whites in this country decode cultural products. The second chapter will then further develop the intellectual context of whiteness within hip hop specifically. Here, I will review the major themes that I perceived within hip hop studies that focus on whiteness and white consumption (those themes being, perspectives on white engagement, white rappers and their importance in attracting white audiences and mainstream support, and finally larger trends of white appropriation of black art forms and cultural products). I will end this chapter with a description and explanation of the methods I used to gather my original data for this project.

At this point, then, we will be fully prepared to delve into my findings and associated analysis. This will be the focus of my third and fourth chapters. I use the notion of learning as a tool to conceptualize how hip hop impacts white listeners. In chapter three, I examine how and what we might learn from hip hop as well as color blind strategies to avoid or alter this learning. Focusing on dichotomies and contradictions in my data, I identify some of the processes involved in developing either an active, critical ear or maintaining a less political form of consumption. I relate these processes, in chapter four, to the learning we do in the academy and its relationship to how we learn from hip hop. Here, I discuss how higher education can, but certainly does not have to, bolster and inform a hip hop education about social structure, examine

the impact of studying hip hop formally in the academy, and evaluate the academy's relationship with hip hop in more theoretical terms. Finally, I will conclude my thesis with an estimation of the larger relevance of my findings, my recommendations for how these findings might be utilized practically as well as suggestions for further study.

White engagement with hip hop in the contemporary moment is an extremely complicated and differentiated experience. Largely due to the flexibility, ubiquity, and historically and psychologically ingrained nature of color-blindness and white supremacy in the US, any move toward a more productive discourse on race, a society more attentive to the needs of suffering minorities, or a more racially egalitarian society is going to be labored and require massive cognitive shifts. However, with hip hop's large influence on pop culture and its massive interracial fan base, as well as its often masked, but nearly always present critique of dominant white culture, there is reason to believe that hip hop can, or is beginning to help enact these changes in America's white youth. Though interest in hip hop (even intense interest or passion) will not automatically engender a more critical eye towards one's own racial privilege and a desire to increase racial equality, the right combination of forces (passion for and desire to understand lyrical content, deeper historical insight of hip hop's evolution, some kind of education about or knowledge of racial and structural inequality, honest self-reflection, etc.) should produce these outcomes. The main goal of this thesis is to enhance our understanding of how hip hop can be most effectively utilized as a tool to fight racial injustice and white supremacy going forward. In so doing, I will also be highlighting the difficulties I observed in overcoming color-blindness for many of the affluent white hip hop fans I studied.

Chapter 1 –The Landscape: Historical and Socio-Political Context of Hip Hop

In order to fully contextualize and understand the impact hip hop has had on contemporary white listeners, we must understand its history, how it originally precluded them and eventually became available for white consumption and why. The first section of this chapter provides a brief history of rap music, particularly focusing on the political and socio-economic climate that produced the music and culture and its shifts and developments that brought it into the mainstream. Additionally, I explain how since the early 90s (the time when all of my interviewees were born and began to gain an awareness of hip hop), mainstream rap has taken a turn for the more violent and thuggish. I then postulate on why this shift may have occurred and how we might better understand it.

The second section of this chapter will shift gears slightly to discuss what we can call the socio-political context of contemporary hip hop and racial politics as well as some of the theory that informs my thinking about these subjects. Specifically, I will be looking at the ideology of color blindness and how it misunderstands the continued importance of race in this country and provides a convenient framework for whites to avoid responsibility for racial inequality and even ignore its existence (even when it is, on occasion, staring them in the face). I will also touch on notions of white privilege, power dynamics and racial inequality. The focus of this chapter is to demonstrate how hip hop's history (specifically the aspects I will highlight) and racial politics in this country might influence or determine how young white hip hoppers understand and interpret current hip hop in important and potentially dangerous ways.

History of Hip Hop in Brief

What most view as the birth of hip hop music and culture, occurred in the Bronx in the early 1970s. In the past nearly 40 years, a lot has changed in hip hop, but it still remains identifiable as the same genre—though admittedly it has branched off and expanded into several sub-genres, including “old school” hip hop which describes the early music made in the 70s, 80s and perhaps even early 90s. Some might argue that the common thread that links contemporary hip hop with the music made at its founding (and everything in between) is more than just the concept of someone rhyming rhythmically over a beat or groove produced by a band or DJ; it’s an ethos. It’s the idea, as DJ Kool Herc, the commonly accepted founder of hip hop, put it, that “hip hop says, ‘come as you are’...it’s about you and me, connecting one to one. That’s why it has universal appeal” (Chang, 2005, intro by DJ Kool Herc, xi). Moreover, this is one important reason why it has had staying power. Before we go any further, it is important that we know what we mean when we say hip hop and understand where it came from and how.

Jeff Chang’s book, Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation, does a good job not only telling the story of the emergence, growth and proliferation of hip hop up through the early 2000s, but also providing the musical, socio-economic, political and cultural milieu that set the stage for hip hop’s birth. His story begins, logically, in the Bronx, as this was the site of the block parties that witnessed the birth of hip hop. However, he does not begin at one of these parties which were the venue for what came to be viewed as the first hip hop shows. In fact he does not get there until the fourth chapter.

Instead, he begins several years earlier with the seemingly unrelated topic of highway construction, the Cross-Bronx Expressway, specifically. He examines how the construction of

this highway along with other “urban renewal” programs led to a white flight out of the Bronx and into the outer boroughs and suburbs of New York City. Meanwhile, there was an increase in subsidized housing projects in the Bronx near the highway, which created a mass influx of black and brown residents just as all the whites and jobs were leaving (Chang, 2005). This environment of joblessness and poverty for black and Hispanic youth in the Bronx was the breeding ground for the birth of a music and arts movement that would come to dominate American youth culture for decades.

George Lipsitz reminds us that “urban renewal” programs like these were not unique to the Bronx, but were, in fact, commonplace beginning as early as the 1930s with the New Deal era Federal Housing Act. While this act provided more loan money for potential home-buyers, racist policies of the Federal Housing Agency ensured that this money went disproportionately to whites. Housing policy working in tandem with federal highway construction (like the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway) displaced black and brown minorities into urban slums, forcing them to live in dingy, underfunded housing projects while money was pumped into growing white-dominated suburbs. These kinds of policy created a non-explicit form of segregation that is still prominent today (Lipsitz, 1998, 7-8). It is particularly important to note that in New York in the post-Civil Rights 1970s, neighborhoods such as the South and East Bronx were intentionally constructed to isolate non-white minorities (predominantly blacks and Puerto Ricans) from the white majority. As Chang points out, these were the ignored communities of “undesirable” Americans, who were seeking desperately to gain some kind of voice or recognition (Chang, 2005).

In the late 60s and early 70s this vying for visibility manifested itself in the emergence of many differentiated gangs in these neighborhoods. Chang looks at the importance of these gangs

in terms of their role in socialization of youth and public image of the Bronx. He discusses how the waning influence of the Civil Rights, Black Power, Black Nationalist, and other similar movements left gangs to focus the energies of the restless minority youth of this otherwise invisible community. Oftentimes, this restlessness was expressed in the form of violence between neighborhoods (or different gang's turf as they came to be viewed). However, in the early 70s, gangs in the Bronx attempted to put aside internal strife to work toward the betterment of their communities and acknowledge their common enemy in the police and "whitey"—their word for describing the systemic oppression, silencing, and political policy of the white patriarchy that ignored their struggles. Though gangs were dissipating and losing their influence by the time hip hop was on the rise, its early innovators, such as Kool Herc, Afrika Baambaata, and Grandmaster Flash were growing up in and being deeply influenced by this gang culture (Chang, 2005).

In the summer of 1973, as the influence and importance of these gangs was waning, a young man by the name of Clive Campbell, with the help of his massive sound system and friends and family, began to unify his neighborhood (and eventually the Bronx) through partying. Campbell, better known by his stage name, DJ Kool Herc, started throwing huge block parties that mirrored in style to some degree the yard party culture of Kingston, Jamaica (where Campbell was born and spent the first 12 years of his life) in the 60s that saw the birth of reggae and dub music. These parties began attracting huge crowds of young people from different neighborhoods all over the Bronx. At first, it was the unprecedented power of his sounds system that was the draw, but soon the new musical style he was pioneering—in which he took the rhythmic, instrumental breakdowns from multiple songs and played them one after another with duel turntables, producing a prolonged frenzy of driving beats—was enticing fans young and old.

On top of this, it was the perfect music for the creative young dancers at the parties to develop a new competitive free-form, acrobatic dance style: “They would simply jump in one after another to go off, take each other out, just ‘break’ wild on each other. Herc called them break boys, b-boys for short” (Chang, 2005, 80-81). Thus, as Herc would incite the crowd with rhythmic rhyming over the beat (shouts like, “yes yes y’all and to the beat y’all”) the foundations for three of the four pillars of hip hop culture (rapping or emceeing, DJing, and breakdancing) were coming together in a single spot (Chang, 2005).

Early hip hop in the Bronx mirrored the gang culture of the 60s and 70s in the fact that there were semi-regional crews that were faithful to specific early pioneers. One of these important forefathers of hip hop, Afrika Bambaataa, a former gang warlord, saw in hip hop the potential to bring youths from different areas and of different ethnicities (though within the Bronx, this still meant almost exclusively black and brown kids) into one big crew that was not doing anything destructive. He transformed the gang The Black Spades into the hip hop crew, Zulu Nation, which treated hip hop partying as a positive alternative to the violence that the gang-dominated era of the previous decade had witnessed. Moreover, Bambaataa added a fifth pillar to hip hop that he viewed as integral to the culture which was knowledge (focusing primarily on knowledge of the history and culture of African Americans) (Chang, 2005). Before we go any further it is important to note that during hip hop’s founding and early years, it was a cultural movement derived from an intentionally created nonwhite space with musical and cultural ties to the Afro-Caribbean and an ethos of fun, self-expression, knowledge and partying as a peaceful substitute for gang violence.

Bambaataa also played an important role in some of hip hop’s first interactions with whiteness. In the early 80s, the fourth pillar of hip hop (graffiti art) had begun its ascent from

being considered criminal vandalism to acceptance within (at least the avant-garde) arts scene of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. FAB 5 FREDDY, one of the most well-known graffiti artists of the time, who was instrumental in hip hop's interaction with this whiter, downtown arts scene invited Bambaataa to play at an arts exhibit in the village. This was probably the first occasion on which a hip hop artist was performing in front of a primarily white audience. The success of this show led to a series of similar hip hop performances at downtown clubs (Chang, 2005).

Meanwhile, the made-for-the-studio group, the Sugar Hill Gang, came out with the first rap radio hit, "Rapper's Delight" in 1979. For any whites not part of the music and arts scene of the Lower East Side, this was most likely their first introduction to hip hop. It also marked an important transition from hip hop being solely a performative music and art style to something that could be captured in a recording studio and packaged for mass marketing. The members of the Sugar Hill Gang were amateur rappers that the independent label Sugarhill Records settled for when hip hop's pioneering artists like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, The Cold Crush Brothers and Bambaataa turned them down (Chang, 2005). Indeed, one of the members of the Sugar Hill Gang, Big Bank Hank, allegedly stole his verse from Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers (Ahmed, et al., 2013). This studio-created version of rap was viewed by purists as a distortion and discredit to the history of the music and culture (Chang, 2005). By 1980, when hip hop first hit the radio it had begun to be decontextualized from its roots, and some were already calling it the death of hip hop.

However, this was far from the death of hip hop in literal terms. In fact, looking back today, many consider the period from the mid-80s to the mid-90s to be the "golden age" of hip hop. As artists began to see how much more visibility and financial success they could achieve through recording their music, hip hop started to grow and expand exponentially. New artists

like Run DMC and the Beastie Boys were solidifying the genre and establishing its place within popular culture. More importantly, though, by the mid-80s in the age of Reaganism, anti-poverty, anti-crime (and, by extension, anti-urban black) policy, influenced hip hop to make the transition from being implicitly political (in terms of giving voice to the marginalized and substituting violence for partying) to explicitly political (DJmutiny, 2010). Pioneered by innovative artists such as Chuck D and his crew Public Enemy, KRS One, and NWA, politically charged hip hop took on topics ranging from educating about the Civil Right Movement and black power, to police brutality, to contemporary forms of racism and more in the mid to late 80s. At the same time, hip hop was gaining more and more popularity and mainstream success. In 1988, MTV launched a show dedicated entirely to rap music videos called “Yo! MTV Raps,” demonstrating hip hop’s influence on popular culture at this point and bringing rap to its widest audiences yet (PBS, 2007).

Curiously, though, at this moment when hip hop’s potential was arguably at a peak (infused with radical, even militant political messages, and reaching a national audience), hip hop went through an important transition in the 90s. Gangsta rap, or more accurately, rap that was ripe with profanity, violence, misogyny, homophobia, etc. took over the mainstream market. Meanwhile, more political or what came to be referred to as “conscious” rap became relegated to the “underground.” In other words, rappers with a strong political message did not receive deals from major labels and did not experience widespread recognition, while rappers peddling violence (particularly black-on-black violence), sexism, and homophobia ruled the airwaves. While West coast rap crew, NWA, are widely viewed as the pioneers of gangsta rap, their debut record, *Straight Outta Compton* (released in 1988), did contain political messages couched in the violence and profanity. However, by the early 90s, the group’s producer Dr. Dre, his protégée

Snoop Dogg, and east coast counterparts like the Notorious B.I.G. were promoting a much more empty, consumerist version of this gangsta'-ism (DJMutiny, 2010).

Many have postulated about what caused this shift in hip hop. Some view it as a natural progression of hip hop's ascent into the forefront of popular culture. After all, Americans have always had a fascination with violence and sex (just look at Hollywood, for example). Others are more suspicious and point to white-owned and controlled major record labels for attempting to propagate negative images of blackness (particularly black masculinity) as violent, vulgar and sex-obsessed (Rodman, 2007). Chuck D sums up this attitude very succinctly: "black death has been pimped by corporations" (Chuck D as quoted in Rodman, 2007). White owned record companies, in this view, are profiteering off of the struggles experienced by urban minorities while simultaneously proliferating messages intended to continue violent trends and stymie potential for upward mobility².

However we explain this trend, the fact remains that since the early 90s gangsterism, violence, misogyny and the like have become staples, or constants in the mainstream rap lexicon. However, many artists (including most the genre's most celebrated and long-lasting artists) have been able to skillfully navigate this terrain, maintaining an image as someone who is "hard" enough to be credible in mainstream rap, but still managing to embed political, radical, or resistant messages. Popular rappers such as Eminem, Kanye West, Jay-Z, Kendrick Lamar, and many more have a lot to say about social issues facing urban youth like police brutality, racial profiling, white privilege, black on black violence, etc. On the 2011 collaboration between two of hip hop's biggest stars, Jay-Z and Kanye West, one track entitled "Murder to Excellence"

² For more information on this transition in rap music, refer to Byron Hurt's documentary, "Beyond Beats and Rhymes."

deals with the tragedy of black on black violence in urban ghettos. They discuss the lack of media attention these crimes receive, how these incidents have become commonplace and expected and a need for change within the black community. The second half of the song shifts to discuss more specifically the changes they wish to see, that being an increase in the number of financially successful blacks (like the two rappers in the song) in an attempt to empower the community. The message of the song is perhaps best summarized in the final lines of West's first verse: "We need to stop and redefine black power/ 41 souls murdered in 50 hours" (Jay-Z and West, 2011). This is just one of countless examples of mainstream hip hop that contains a substantive critique of social issues and injustice in this country.

One of the central questions of this thesis is to what degree are these messages getting through to white listeners. For fans, who only became aware of the music in the 90s (like those in my study), it is possible that they are unaware of hip hop's history and roots, and would have the mistaken assumption that violence, sexism, and other negative representations are an inherent part of hip hop. Hopefully, this brief history has demonstrated why this is not so. The following section will examine some of the socio-political and ideological factors that might be inhibiting the depth to which white listeners engage with hip hop. It will also provide a framework for understanding contemporary racial politics.

Socio-Political and Theoretical Backdrop

Because this thesis is focusing on whiteness in hip hop—particularly the consumption of and participation in hip hop culture by privileged white students at Vassar College—the theoretical grounding for my argument will be in notions of whiteness and white privilege. I will be using a conception of whiteness similar to that of Rodriguez (2006) as well as many others

that whiteness is not fixed, but like any other racial signification, is a contested definition with varying experiences across class, gender, sexuality, etc. The primary goal of my research will be to determine the role hip hop plays as an important factor in young white fans' conceptions of race, particularly in terms of how they view their own whiteness, white privilege and social structure, more broadly.

Before we begin to even discuss whiteness however, we must agree on an understanding of race in general. Omi and Winant's (1994) racial formation theory calls for an understanding that the way we view race in contemporary society is based on a history of ascribing meanings to biologically insignificant characteristics (skin color). For hundreds of years, western pseudo-science was used to explain how certain races (generally, blacks) were biologically inferior to others (whites) (Kendall, 2006). Modern science has discredited this view completely, indicating that "there is greater [genetic] variation within 'racial' groups than between them" (American Anthropological Association, as quoted by Jenson, 2005). Thus, the vast statistical inequalities that exist between races in terms of educational outcomes, income and economic success, housing, incarceration, health insurance coverage and more can be attributed to a history of unequal power distribution and ideological preservation of privilege rather than biological deficiencies of certain races.

To anyone who has spent much time thinking critically or reading about racial politics and inequality in this country, there is little question about who the "winners" and "losers" are in regard to the inequality mentioned above. Jenson discusses the fact that we live in a white supremacist society in which white privilege works on a systemic and institutional scale as well as in our everyday life and interactions (Jenson, 2005). White privilege means, among other things, that whiteness has been naturalized and is viewed as the norm against which "the other"

is defined—it is seen as pure. To be white in American society essentially means to be without race because it gives you the power to ignore the impact that race has had on your life, and consequently the impact it has on others’: “That’s part of white privilege—the privilege to ignore the reality of a white supremacist society when it makes us uncomfortable” (Jensen, 2005, 10). Beyond that, it also has very real and tangible expressions in one’s life. Whites in this country are statistically more likely to have better educational resources and higher levels of educational attainment, earn higher salaries, survive life threatening illness, have access to mortgages and home ownership, own stocks and accrue a substantial net worth and more (Jenson, 2005). Pager’s examination of the impact having a criminal record has on employment demonstrated that whites with a criminal record were more likely to receive a callback for a job interview than blacks with no criminal record (keeping all other relevant variables as fixed as possible) (Pager, 2003). All of this is allowed to persist due to a series of policy decisions and delicate ideological shifts to maintain a more invisible, yet clearly equally insidious form of post-civil rights era racism.

The most important of those ideological shifts is a movement away from overtly racist attitudes and Jim Crow era segregation to a notion of color blindness that dominates discourse on race today. Bonilla-Silva’s term, “abstract liberalism” speaks to the notion that we are all created equal and in America are given an equal opportunity to succeed. This should sound very familiar to most of us, as this is the ideal that the nation was founded upon—what has come to be known as the “American Dream.” His book, Racism with Racists details the ways in which racism has become so mystified in this country and entrenched in unjust policy decisions, that we believe it is a thing of the past. The standard wisdom goes something like this: “perhaps there are some racists left in the country, but they are all uneducated hicks, and all civilized people

recognize that we are all the same on the inside.” The danger in this kind of thinking is that it minimizes the history of racial oppression and continuing systemic issues that feed into current inequality. However, because whites have the privilege to ignore their role in downplaying the importance or even existence of this inequality, we are able to happily view ourselves as non-racist while continuing to benefit from our white privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). We are the liberal moderates that Martin Luther King Jr. saw as the most irritating—even perhaps the most dangerous and effective—barrier to the racial equality he sought over fifty years ago (King, 1963).

The way in which color-blindness has replaced overt racism as a dominant racial ideology in this country fits well with Gramscian notions of cultural hegemony. Gramsci sought to conceptualize how the dominant or ruling class in contemporary capitalist societies maintains its dominance (or the status quo). He found that they do so by defining cultural norms and values in terms that seem mutually beneficial to all classes within the society but actually serve to uphold existing hierarchies (i.e. only the interests of those in power). By defining this dominant ideology for the whole of a given society, inequality becomes naturalized or seems inevitable. It is important, then, that this ideology is flexible and can be responsive to changes in the rest of a society’s awareness or understandings (these might be precipitated by social movements, natural disasters, gradual shifts in culture, scientific developments, etc.). Thus, cultural hegemony refers to the set of beliefs, norms, ideals that serve to cultivate and conserve the domination of a particular class (Gramsci, 1971).

By this theorization, color-blindness, as a response to Civil Rights era legislation and changes in public opinion served to re-naturalize racial inequality. Indeed, it has been utilized as an effective tool for fighting against policies or practices that seek to foster greater racial equity

(such as affirmative action or redistricting strategies) by labeling them as reverse racism. Any policy that attempts to recognize race and its continued importance is viewed as “pulling the race card” and represents an inability to “move beyond race,” which we as a society believe we have done. However, this notion that we are “post-race” and have achieved the American ideals of equality or at least equal opportunity actually serves to maintain inequality and the interests of the dominant class, or more specifically white supremacy (Omi, 2011). Hence, we can understand color-blindness as an instrument of contemporary American cultural hegemony.

Scott (1990) builds on Gramsci’s understanding of power and subordination in his book, Domination and the Arts of Resistance. He views dominant or hegemonic ideologies as a “public transcript,” but believes there is a “hidden transcript” in which oppressed groups express their resistance to this dominant ideology. When subjugated groups in society interact with those in power, they are coerced to act with deference. They may present the appearance that they are willing participants in their subjugation (or that they have bought into a hegemonic ideology) to avoid persecution, or to curry favor with the dominant group. The dominant group, in turn, acts out its own ‘self-portrait’ as superior elites who deserve their status. Scott calls this public performance of social hierarchy the public transcript. But outside the surveillance of the powerful, subjugated groups can develop a hidden transcript in which they develop and express their grievances toward the powerful. The hidden transcript, then, can make its way into public discourse when subordinate groups either act out disguised forms of resistance (e.g. indirect resistance by identifiable persons, direct resistance by anonymous persons, etc.) or through overt insubordination (voicing the hidden transcript “in the teeth of power”) (Scott, 1990). Rose (1994) dissects three rap songs to demonstrate a “hidden politics of rap” (as I have done in the

previous section with the more recent song “Murder to Excellence”). We might view this “hidden politics” as a manifestation of the hidden transcript in a public context.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the historical and socio-political context for contemporary white consumption of hip hop as well as providing a framework for how I think about and understand issues of race, power dynamics, and inequality. By demonstrating how hip hop grew out of a non-white space but was eventually adopted by white culture and explaining how color blindness hides the reality of white privilege from uncritical whites, I hope to have set the scene for an investigation into white consumption of hip hop. A primary goal of this project is to determine how and in what ways hip hop may or may not allow white listeners to become more aware of their white privilege and the ways they are complicit in its endurance. Are they merely interpreting hip hop within the realm of public transcript in which a color-blind lens removes the critical power from the music or have they penetrated to the hidden transcript messages of resistance and social critique embedded within much of hip hop content? The following chapter will explore how other thinkers have considered the role of white hip hoppers and white consumption of black art, generally. Some stress the dangers of color blindness and negative representations in hip hop while others are more hopeful about possibilities for racial coalition building. This review then leads into an examination of my research method and how I designed it to fill holes in and engage with the writings of these other scholars

Chapter 2 – The Issues: White Consumption, Performers, and Political Potential

Now that we have a better understanding for the context and history of hip hop as well as the political and ideological landscape in which it exists today, we must locate my study within the larger academic discourse to which I am attempting to contribute. This chapter will provide a review of the relevant literature surrounding my inquiry. I focus on scholarship that seeks to understand or analyze white participation in and consumption of hip hop and black arts, more broadly. My literature review is broken up into three sub-sections that attempt to identify key trends within this scholarship: debate surrounding the meaning of white consumption, white rappers, and white consumption of black culture. Though the majority of this literature is reasonably pessimistic about the impact whites have on black culture and on hip hop, specifically, some scholars do see a positive side of white consumption of hip hop. My study hopes to inform the ideas of all of these thinkers with a qualitatively rich understanding of how hip hop influences and impacts the lives and understandings of white hip hoppers. Thus, the final section of this chapter will present an explanation of my research method as well as point out some of its strengths and limitations. The literature presented in this chapter both influenced me in how I formulated my research method—in terms of the type of study I thought would bring nuance and depth to current debates surrounding white engagement—and in my analysis of the data I collected through this method.

Beginning in the early to mid-nineties, a growing body of scholarship on hip hop has emerged that ranges from content analysis, to political potential, to the globalization of hip hop, to the inclusion and importance of white rappers and much more—many refer to this new and expanding line of inquiry as hip hop studies. Since it is outside the scope of this project to

include a summary of all of this scholarship, I will focus on the topics mentioned above that deal specifically—and generally make a value judgment about—whiteness and hip hop (and other black art forms). I begin by examining studies that take differing positions on the meaning and potential of white consumption of hip hop. This debate is clearly central to this thesis as I am also taking a position, as well as, attempting to qualify and illuminate those arguments put forward by others. From there, I will examine the emergence of white rappers and their importance in hip hop's widespread acceptance and appeal. While hip hop remains an art form primarily produced by black artists, the rise to prominence of a few white rappers gives some theorists pause. The public success of white rappers feeds into color-blind notions that we are all equal and no cultural spheres are reserved for only certain groups; talent and hard work lead to success regardless of the endeavor in question. In the final section of the literature review, I will broaden my perspective by looking at the history of white cultural appropriation of black art more broadly. Whites in this country have long been adopting, hijacking and sometimes outright stealing black art forms, especially musical ones. This section of the literature review will look at some other examples to try and identify how hip hop fits into this ongoing story. I will conclude the chapter by discussing how my research fits in with the scholarship I have outlined and provide a detailed description of my research method.

Possible Meanings of Consumption

Two central questions for this thesis and ones that many other scholars have pondered and investigated are what causes whites to be interested in hip hop in the first place—if its content is often so foreign from their experiences and is often even vilifying of their position—and what does their consumption and participation in the art mean for hip hop? This is, in fact, one of the most contested questions in the field of hip hop studies. Some maintain that hip hop

has emerged as a modern social, political and cultural movement that has taken the place of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s:

“Here's something that started as just music, but from that music it has grown to encompass a whole culture, a lifestyle, an ideology, a point of view, points of view, if you will. And so for that reason, when I look at the present, I see that hip hop has much more influence now than does civil rights” (Yusuf, 2004).

The notion is that because hip hop has become a central feature of popular culture across racial boundaries, that the “hip hop generation” has a more progressive understanding of race and black culture: “you're going to have a generation of people who have a better sense of Black people and African-American culture because... hip hop has had such a profound impact on their life” (Yusuf, 2004).

Not surprisingly, this line of thinking has generated a backlash from the older intellectuals of the civil rights era. Their stance is that rap provides a stereotypical image of black bodies and negative role models for black youth: “By reinforcing the stereotypes that long hindered blacks, and by teaching young blacks that a thuggish adversarial stance is the properly 'authentic' response to a presumptively racist society, rap retards black success” (McWhorter, 2006). Because much of mainstream hip hop presents and promotes stereotypical and essentialist images of blackness (think MTV music videos with flashy cars, baggy clothes and scantily clad women), some of hip hop’s fiercest critics liken it to a modern-day form minstrelsy (LaGrone, 2000; Muhammad, 2012). This implies that black artists are performing for the entertainment of whites while allowing or even helping the continued oppression of blacks. However, this argument depends, at least in part, on the complicity of white audiences.

Using in-depth and informal interviews and participant observation at a music venue in a mostly white area, Jason Rodriguez attempts to understand and unpack the awareness and

appreciation that white listeners bring to the music. He concludes that these white youths, on the whole, operate under a color-blind ideology which focuses on sameness across race and diminishes the enduring importance of race in social relations in this country. In their attempts to remain politically correct and not prejudiced, these white hip hop fans are diluting the explicitly racialized commentary and messages in the music. They are ignoring the realities of racial inequality that many of the artists they were listening to were trying to bring into public consciousness. Rodriguez's primary argument, then, is that the hegemonic ideology of color-blindness is, more often than not, taking the potential political power and message out of hip hop. (Rodriguez, 2006). However, he does not go so far as to call these hip hop performances, minstrelsy. Most of the artists that these fans were seeing perform were on the more conscious and less mainstream side of hip hop.

In his book, Why White Kids Love Hip Hop, Bakari Kitwana presents a more positive vision of white participation in hip hop. He looks at white kids who are deeply involved in hip hop and sees a true interest in and desire to connect with black culture. He is one of the preeminent scholars arguing that hip hop is the next big step in race relations in this country (since the Civil Rights Movement). His perspective is that hip hop provides a space for young people who feel dissatisfied with the status quo to exercise their discontents and build coalitions across race (Kitwana, 2005). Moreover, he believes hip hop's critics (particularly older intellectuals of the Civil Rights era) are reducing hip hop to its most obviously negative sound bites. In order to understand hip hop's true political importance and analyze it cogently, one must familiarize oneself with the vast and wide-ranging body of music that has emerged in the last 40 years, as well as the bulk of scholarship in hip hop studies (Kitwana, 2004).

Wright elaborates on this point. She argues that hip hop, in the mainstream (i.e. the public image of hip hop), is being controlled by white owned corporations that are interested in reinforcing negative stereotypes about blackness. The public image available to the masses essentializes blackness and works to maintain white patriarchal hegemony. Looking at underground hip hop, though, she argues there are much more positive, even revolutionary, messages. Her problem with this is that underground hip hop is much less accessible for the mass of society (perhaps those that need it most) and is only being digested by those privileged individuals that have the resources and free time to delve into it (more often white kids in the suburbs than urban minorities) (Wright, 2010). However, as I argued in the previous chapter, there is much in “mainstream” hip hop that still presents a non-essentialized, socially conscious (though, they would never call it that) message.

Moving beyond an assessment of the messages in hip hop and their reception, Clay lauds hip hop for its potential in mobilizing youth for political activism (much in the same line of thinking as Kitwana). She argues that hip hop still empowers otherwise silenced groups by presenting their grievances (e.g. racial profiling, unequal educational and economic opportunity etc.) on a public platform (Clay, 2006). However, unlike Kitwana, she leaves out racial coalition building as a part of her investigation of hip hop activism. Wright agrees with Clay that hip hop’s social (possibly even socially transformative) power lies within hip hop activism. Activist groups that use hip hop style and culture to educate youth and get them involved in politics—to take control of their own fate in a sense—hold the true power of hip hop (Wright, 2010).

White rappers

Many scholars who are more pessimistic about, or at least wary of, the role whiteness and whiteness plays in hip hop focus on the damage they perceive white rappers to have had on the culture. Indeed, a large portion of the scholarship that exists on whiteness and hip hop focuses on the importance of those white artists. White rapper, Marshall Mathers (better known by his stage name, Eminem) seems to be of particular interest to hip hop scholars. Jonathon Scott argues that hip hop only began to be celebrated as a legitimate art and poetic form after Eminem came to prominence. Before the release of Mathers' 1999 debut studio album "Slim Shady LP," no art critics were lauding rap as beautiful modern poetry, the way they have of Eminem and other rappers since. He views this as a reflection of the enduring white supremacy in this country where something can only be socially acceptable and supported if it has a stamp of whiteness on it. Thus, he contrasts the "whiteness" of policy with the "blackness" of popular culture in this country. While he does acknowledge that the content of Eminem's lyrics deals heavily with inequality, the benefits he has received from his whiteness, as well as how it has made success in hip hop (still a predominantly black art form) more difficult, Scott is wary of the reception of listeners. Hip hop is sublimated when the art form is taken as a reflection of the specific artist or natural outcome of the market instead of acknowledging its social and cultural roots and history. Whether or not this has been accomplished is left somewhat unclear (Scott, 2010).

Ryan Ford gives us another, perhaps more pessimistic analysis of the importance of Eminem's success. He discusses the music industry's attempt to cater to white audiences. He believes the roots and message of hip hop are being "white washed" in order to give it more universal appeal (to make it more ingestible for white audiences). He argues that emergence of white rap super stars at this stage in hip hop's development could mean that monetary interests

have replaced the social critique of hip hop's inception. The final question of the piece is whether Eminem marks the end of hip hop as a piece of black culture (unlikely, in my opinion) or a new beginning where the origins of hip hop might be revived (Ford, 2010)

Mickey Hess has yet another perspective on Eminem (as well as earlier white hip hop artists, Vanilla Ice and The Beastie Boys). While he grants that each of these artist set hip hop album sales records with their debut albums and this probably had a lot to do with their whiteness, only Eminem garnered long-term success in the industry. He argues that this is because Eminem recognized that "realness" was of the utmost importance for a rapper. By being honest about his background and the benefits he received due to his whiteness, he was able to redefine "realness" which had been more synonymous with blackness as well as the recognition of the struggles related to it (Hess, 2005). However, how listeners are interpreting the messages these white artists are putting forth presents a whole other set of difficult questions. The power of color-blindness could lead white fans to view white rappers as further evidence of sameness across race. As Ford argues this white washes hip hop's impact, or perhaps more accurately, removes its color entirely.

White Consumption of Black Culture

These critics' fears are understandable given the fact that hip hop is part of a long tradition in this country of white appropriation of black art (particularly music). Black cultural products that garner mass appeal are routinely hijacked in some sense by whites (e.g. jazz, the blues, rock and roll, soul, etc.). Black musical expression has, for decades, been an avenue for this largely invisible and oppressed group to gain some kind of visibility, and a public platform to express a shared sense of inequality (Lewis, 1982). Thus, when the music is hijacked and appropriated for white audiences, it can quickly lose its social significance to the community that

it was originally created by and for. Stephen Haymes examines this process in his article, “Black Cultural Identity, White Consumer Culture and the Politics of Difference.” He argues that white consumption of black culture commodifies and warps it into something that no longer serves or really belongs to the black community. He takes the example of uncritical media representations of rappers as pop culture icons. He argues that these representations present an image of blackness without acknowledging the history that produced this image in the first place. In this way, the commodification of black culture deepens feelings of meaninglessness and hopelessness in the black community (Haymes, 1992).

Jon Cruz, in his book Culture on the Margins, provides us with a framework for understanding white appreciation and appropriation of black art forms. Examining the earliest black American musical form, the slave song or spiritual, Cruz develops a critical lens with which to interpret the many examples of white fascination with and appropriation of black art and cultural forms (what he calls the culture of the margins, referring those peoples that are marginalized in American society). Cruz describes three basic issues that he sees as crucial in understanding white appropriation of marginal culture: “the emergence of authenticity and its ensuing crisis, the tendency to separate sympathetic cultural observation from social life, and the proclivity to reify music” (Cruz, 1999, 23). The first of these trends describes how the notion of authenticity in black art and music came to be viewed as desirable and was in turn commodified, in a sense. The irony here is that this commodification inevitably leads to a kind of “cultural theft” which obviously destroys its authenticity and erodes the culture that produced it originally (this falls in line with Haymes’ argument above). The second of these problematic developments speaks to a separation between art and the social context that produced it that occurs in the minds of “sympathetic” white audiences: “cultural aesthetics [become] separated from the larger social,

political, and economic contexts in which the culture being observed has taken shape” (Cruz, 1999, 22). This then feeds into his final observation which is that musical or artistic forms are often viewed as “fixed cultural good[s],” as opposed to being recognized as variable and versatile across space, social context, and history. Cruz hopes that by understanding these flaws in our cultural interpretation we will not only have a better understanding of how marginal culture has been stolen and appropriated throughout our history, but also to see how these art forms both influence and reflect larger socio-historical trends (Cruz, 1999).

Mark Anthony Neal’s article “Sold out on Soul: the Corporate Annexation of Black Popular Music” provides another historical example of white appropriation of black art that can be informed by Cruz’s insights. He again points out the importance of authenticity in terms of how soul (and later hip hop) was able to be mass marketed to white audiences. Both provide an image of blackness that can be considered authentic by outsiders, but is not intimidating; it makes blackness bite-sized and manageable. Particularly with soul music, he posits that working in tandem with Blaxploitation film-making (that was in its prime at the same time), the music helped white audiences feel they were connecting to something authentically black that was digestible and not dangerous, instead of acknowledging the realities of the Civil Rights Movement that was in full force at the same time (Neal, 1997). This corroborates Cruz’s second point about the separation of art and larger social trends.

He does believe that soul and hip hop also provided a mass landscape for a sharing of ideas across the black community. Cruz also acknowledges this phenomenon with slave songs (when blacks truly had no other way of sharing ideas across space), but they both agree that with the cultural appropriation of these musical forms, they begin to lose this critical potential. Neal relies on an assumption that the appropriation of soul music was due to a packaging of blackness

into a neatly wrapped box that was manageable and an inherent youthful desire to rebel against the parent generation (Neal, 1997). We will see in the coming chapters the degree to which Cruz's and Neal's insights are helpful for understanding hip hop's mass, multi-racial appeal.

Methods

Hopefully, by now we are beginning to get a sense for the larger debates that exist within hip hop studies about whiteness and white cultural appropriation of Black art forms. In this section, I will make plain how my research method seeks to fill holes in and enrich this academic discourse. By focusing on engagement and participation in hip hop as a *process* of identity formation and tying this to notions of whiteness and color blindness, I hope to give nuance to the opposing perspectives on the meaning of white consumption of hip hop. I also hope to add depth to perspectives about hip hop education and pedagogy, particularly relating to social justice and racial coalition building.

My study involves two types of independent research: survey data (that I designed) and semi-structured in-depth interviews. I began this process by compiling a list of white hip hop fans at Vassar who were interested in participating in my research. In order to find these subjects, I contacted hip hop 101 (Vassar's on-campus organization for students interested in hip hop), talked to a Freshman writing seminar on Jay-Z and writing raps, contacted members of Hip Hop Theater (a community outreach group where Vassar students and local kids work together to create and perform a play using messages from hip hop songs), and used personal friends and contacts that I know are interested in hip hop. After compiling this list (about 35 people), I e-mailed everyone my survey and received over 20 responses.

The purpose of the survey is twofold. First it is to develop a larger more representative understanding of Vassar's white hip hop audience. I gained basic personal data (age, sex, family income, racial make-up of home community, whether they grew up in an urban, rural, or suburban environment, etc.) and some initial data on their experience with hip hop (what subgenres or artists they prefer, how long they have been listening to hip hop, who are their favorite rappers, what defines a good rapper, etc.). This gives me a basic snapshot of what a white Vassar hip hop fan might look like. The second purpose of the survey is to help determine which subjects would be the most eligible for (as well as who might be interested in) further interview. It also helped me zero in on specific subjects for the in-depth interviews based on the information someone provided in their survey. In other words, my interview questions were slightly different depending on what attracted someone to the music, what their home community was like and whether they were involved in activism (hip hop-related or otherwise)³.

Let me now take a moment to reflect on the strengths and limitations of my method and the specific location of my research. As I am an undergraduate at Vassar College, it seemed an obvious choice to draw on the wealth of white middle and upper-middle class hip hop fans in this community as subjects for my research on this topic. However, convenience was far from the only consideration in making the choice to use my fellow undergrads for my research. College students are some of the (if not *the*) biggest consumers of music and popular culture, generally. They are especially tuned in to the subtle changes and emerging trends within popular culture. Thus, college students are most likely to be aware of the present state of the music. As hip hop is a constantly changing and evolving art form, it is important that my study be as up-to-date as possible. Moreover, college is a time when young people develop their own conceptions and

³ See Appendix A for the complete survey

beliefs about the world around them. As we transition from youth to adulthood, the understandings and methods of interpretation that we develop are likely to have lasting impressions on our worldview. Particularly at this historical moment, when college students have grown up immersed in a popular culture that has been dominated by hip hop (particularly, the more gangster side of hip hop) our entire lives, it is important to see how we understand and engage with it.

All that being said, I do recognize the potential limitations of this study. First, the simple constraint of this being an undergraduate thesis project completed over little more than half a year drastically limits the possible scope of the project. Twenty or so survey responses along with six interviews can hardly be seen as a representative sample size. Additionally, I acknowledge that studying a group to which I admit to belonging, makes objective analysis tricky (though, when is objectivity ever not?). The fact that I interviewed a few of my close friends, and included even more in my survey response is clearly problematic in terms of distancing myself as a researcher, but I did my best to maintain an intellectually critical eye, even when analyzing my peers. Finally, the broader relevance of my study is likely somewhat compromised in the fact that I am only studying a very privileged group of students at an elite, and self-proclaimed *liberal* liberal arts college. Moreover, the majority of the students I interviewed were studying the humanities or social sciences which could further skew my data. I assumed going in that these factors might makes it more likely that I would find critical listeners than I would if I studied a more diverse group including less privileged and less left-wing white hip hoppers. While this may very well have been the case, my data demonstrated a range of interpretive frameworks and racial understandings despite the subjects' relative similarity in terms of background. I will discuss this in more detail in the following chapters.

Instead of viewing this as solely a limiting factor, I intended to use this potential homogeneity to gain more insight into a specific type of engagement with hip hop. For my interviews, I tried to focus primarily on subjects who had a deep connection with the music and stressed the importance of message or content in addition to musicality or artistry. I organized my interview questions into four main categories that attempt to reveal the process by which some listeners come to a critical engagement with hip hop (that in some cases even leads to hip hop related activism). The first and perhaps most important section seeks to identify each subject's personal journey with hip hop (when they started listening to hip hop, how their engagement has changed over the years, what might have caused these changes including coming to Vassar, etc.). I then move to how they understand their position within hip hop culture (as a white fan) and their perception of other white hip hop fans (including the relationship between Vassar and hip hop). Next I investigate their awareness of social critique in raps, and finally ask them about their interactions with blackness outside of hip hop (including any activism hip hop-related or not, they might be involved in)⁴.

The goal of this second stage of research was to attain a deeper more detailed understanding of my subjects' personal history with hip hop as well as their level of critical engagement. By framing hip hop as an important aspect in the development of one's understanding of self (within a racialized country), I tried to identify the processes that lead certain individuals to engage critically and honestly with the text and, in turn contemplate their own whiteness and its importance within a white supremacist society. All of names of my interview subjects have been changed to protect their identities.

⁴ See Appendix B for the outline of Interview questions

Conclusion

This chapter provides an array of perspectives on how one might understand white participation in and consumption of hip hop while also providing a deeper historical perspective on white appropriation of black art and culture. The scholars examined demonstrate different perceptions about hip hop's influence on race relations and its potential to influence future racial politics. I designed my study to be in dialogue with these perspectives and to bring nuance and theoretical illumination to the debates surrounding white engagement. Particularly, I want to demonstrate how both the critics and supporters of white engagement are right to some degree, and begin to unpack how white fans come to a particular kind of engagement (be it color-blind or more critical and self-reflective). The following two chapters will present this analysis and theorization. The next chapter will focus on the idea of learning from hip hop. I will examine what I perceived my subjects to be learning in their engagement with hip hop to see if racial stereotypes are being reinforced, color-blind ideology is detracting from lessons in the content, or people are actually learning something valuable about themselves and the importance of race in their lives and the lives of others.

Chapters 3 – Learning *from* Hip Hop: What We Hear When we Listen

As I made clear in the previous chapter, I expected, before having conducted my study, that most of my subjects would be engaging critically with hip hop, as well as reflecting on their position as privileged white fans. I was, in part, correct in this assumption (most people had at least some degree of recognition for their own privilege), but was also relatively surprised to discover that many of the interviewees were still operating under varying degrees of color blindness. Therefore, my initial goal to identify the processes that lead a certain fan to think critically about racialized narratives in hip hop and their own identity as a privileged white citizen became somewhat unrealistic. Instead, I have chosen to focus on the process of learning (both *from* and *with* hip hop) as a way to organize my analysis of my interview and survey data. In the next two chapters I will explain how I understand these concepts and why I found them to be useful tools for understanding the data I generated in my study.

Learning from Hip Hop

Since very early in hip hop's evolution (probably beginning with Afrika Bambaataa's founding of the Zulu Nation in the late 70s) knowledge has been intimately tied to hip hop. Scholars such as Catherine Powell (and many others) have argued that hip hop should be viewed as a legitimate and acknowledged form of education, particularly for underserved groups, like young black males (who represent a large portion of the listenership and producers of hip hop) (Powell, 1991). Indeed, many have argued for and successfully incorporated a hip hop pedagogy into mainstream educational settings as a means to capture and maintain the interest of young black students, who often are pigeon-holed into labels like "problem children" or "at-risk," and consequently receive inadequate attention from the school system (they become viewed as

problems to be dealt with as opposed to students to help educate) (Award, 2004; Bridges, 2011; Volz, 2008). However, young black males are far from the only listeners of hip hop, and it is important to understand what other listeners are potentially learning from hip hop as well.

This chapter will look at what I perceived my interviewees to be learning from their “hip hop education.” I have broken these kinds of learning into three categories. Each category has at least two modes of understanding which generally correspond to a listener either learning the lesson within the public transcript sphere of color-blindness or penetrating to the more resistant or counter-hegemonic hidden transcript. The first section speaks to a dichotomy between listeners feeling that they are learning about some monolithic blackness or black culture as opposed to learning about one (or several) artist’s reflection and understanding of his position in society and using that knowledge to inform or color their perspective on social structure and inequality. I then move in the second section to examining how artistry and creativity operate to mask or hide social commentary within lyrics. This is a complicated process because listeners and music critics can focus too much on artistry and miss out on the importance of the content of the lyrics. However, rap as an art form intentionally couches social critique in creative use of language which could have the opposite effect (appreciation for lyricism and artistry becomes an entry point for gaining an awareness of the lyrical content). Finally, I will point out how the multi-racial nature of the “hip hop community” provides a space for people of different backgrounds to meet and get to know each other. By learning about one another on a human and personal level, we begin to break down racial tropes and stereotypes. However, I will also call into question how often this process occurs and the degree to which it is just a nice fantasy.

This chapter will demonstrate that hip hop can teach us a variety of things, and what it teaches us is highly dependent on our standpoint and perspective. The more we are actively

engaging and questioning the lessons we feel hip hop is teaching us, the more likely we are to break through to the hidden transcript that has been intentionally obscured in hip hop content in order to allow it be commercially successful. Moreover, I will point out how some of my subjects were more successful at penetrating to the hidden transcript and which were still operating with varying degrees of a color blind lens and begin to unpack why this might be.

Learning about Blackness vs. Learning about Social Structure

One of the key questions I asked in my interviews was about what each subject felt hip hop taught them about blackness or black culture. Clearly, this question gets right to the heart of what we feel we are learning from hip hop, so it seems a logical place to begin our analysis in this chapter. My intention in asking this question was to identify whether subjects felt they were learning or gaining insight into some monolithic black culture (obviously, applying any set of ideas to an entire group is stereotyping and essentializing that group's identity, which is probably a more dangerous form of racism even than color blindness). Most of my respondents were careful not to make any claims that hip hop had taught them anything about blackness as a whole. More often they believed that hip hop gave them insight into the difficulties of life as an urban minority in the United States, made them more aware of certain issues, or heightened or added depth to their understanding of social structure and privilege. This range of responses reflects the varying degrees to which my interviewees were reflecting critically about their whiteness and their position within the hip hop community as white listeners.

Almost everyone I interviewed discussed a sense that there was something different or foreign about hip hop and listed this as an important reason for their initial attraction to the music. Though originally they simply liked how strange and different the music sounded, as

they became more invested in the genre and delved deeper into it (often becoming interested in less well-known artists or so-called underground or conscious rap), they became more reflective of the differences in their experiences as opposed to those of poor urban blacks portrayed in the music they listen to. While one or two of the most color-blind interviewees felt that racialized narratives were “immature” and that rap should focus on unity and community, most felt hip hop helped them consider the differences between their own more privileged upbringing and the struggles of living in the kind of urban poverty that is a common subject matter for a wide array of rappers. Some even went so far as to claim that hip hop helped them consider how their privilege was experienced by and worked to hold back the \under-privileged or oppressed minorities in America:

“More than teaching me something explicitly about blackness it taught me to think more critically about my own whiteness and to understand the way my whiteness is perceived and the way it works on non-whites in ways I hadn’t considered before and had never been compelled or propelled to consider before” (Steve)

A couple of people did acknowledge that while they recognized that it was problematic, they still felt that hip hop was giving them insight, or some kind of connection to or understanding of the lives of urban blacks. James, for example, in discussing his experiences with hip hop theater, felt that hip hop

“gave me a false sense of belonging to that culture, like when I go to hip hop theater and I know the same songs as those kids, I like to pretend like it’s because we have some connection or I have some understanding that the average white person doesn’t. But I don’t really think that I do, to the degree that I’d like to think at least” (James).

This speaks to a concern that he and Andrew (another of the more critical and self-reflective interviewees) expressed about how white listeners engage with hip hop. Both felt that this “false sense of belonging” was dangerous. Andrew added that there might even be a disconnect between what an artist is trying to put forth and the way white listeners interpret it, precisely because they are unaware or lack understanding of the social context and circumstances that

these young rappers are coming from (this echoes the sentiments of Nas and Jay-Z from my epigraphs).

Continuing our discussion after I had turned off the recorder, Andrew and I discussed how there is a very fine line between hip hop informing white listeners about the struggles of the (predominantly minority) urban poor and the difference between those struggles and their more privileged, comfortable lifestyles, versus hip hop giving whites a false sense of an authentic connection to blackness that then provides them with a feeling of moral absolution. In other words, because a white person listens to and perhaps is deeply invested in hip hop, they assume that they are somehow “on the right side” already and do not need to think further about or take action against continuing racial inequality. This falls in line with Cruz’s ideas about separating art from the larger context that produced it, thus allowing white listeners not to reflect on racial tensions and the part they play as privileged whites within a white supremacist society.

I could see this sense of moral absolution in some of the most color blind students I interviewed. However, as I claimed earlier, most of my subjects were very careful not to generalize their insights to all of black culture and were more likely to frame their knowledge in terms of recognizing a gap between their privileged lifestyles and the harder lives of oppressed blacks represented in the songs. Many, though, also claimed that they did not think this was the norm and believed that many white audiences were having racial tropes and black stereotypes reinforced through their engagement with hip hop. While hip hop may very well bring a lot of otherwise over-looked, or even intentionally marginalized, experiences to light, rappers are only providing one window into this experience and are not necessarily credible news sources. Thus, when we interpret the content of a song, it is important that we put it in dialogue with other sources of information about the topic. Ideally, hip hop might spark us to then become more

informed about social issues that are being brought up and contemporary forms of racism. Recognizing that there is a clear difference in terms of experience and social setting between what one hears in a rap song and one's experiences as a privileged white citizen can be a very good jumping off point to get interested and motivated to seek out this information (or even get involved in activism). Sometimes, as was generally the case with the students I interviewed, hip hop gave more meaning or added a more personal element to the issues of social structure that they were learning about at Vassar (we will discuss this trend further in the next chapter).

It is important to note, as some of my interviewees did, that this is not necessarily the norm. Many white listeners may indeed believe they are learning something authentic about blackness (as Neal suggests was the case with fans of soul music, and Cruz suggests was the case with numerous other black art forms before it). Whether one feels they are learning about blackness or gaining more insight into social inequality represents an important distinction between a hidden and public transcript.

Learning about Language: creativity as social commentary

While one possible public transcript of rap is that it “teaches” us about blackness by actually reinforcing racist stereotypes (e.g. blacks are all violent, sex-obsessed, drug dealers, etc.), this is probably only accepted by critics of rap who do not like or care about the music and spend little to no time actually listening to it. For the majority of white hip hop fans, a more likely public transcript might be interpreting rap through the lens of color-blindness. Rodriguez points out that by infusing a color blind interpretation of the music, white fans miss what the artists are really trying to say (Rodriguez, 2006). Further, Scott warns that when the music is removed from its social and cultural context (as is the case when it is being interpreted with a

color-blind lens) then hip hop becomes “sublimated” (Scott, 2004). To better understand this process, we must unpack the role of creativity and artistry as it relates to how rappers are appreciated. Because hip hop is a language-based art form, lyricism and creativity are used both as means to deliver and sometimes obscure the message contained in the lyrics. This section will examine the degree to which hip hop is consumed as art (in which case, fans feel they are learning about language and form solely) or as social commentary (or some combination of the two).

As I mentioned in the last chapter, Eminem’s rise to fame marked one of the first times rap was lauded by critics as a legitimate form of art or poetry. One of the most important points that the authors I discussed in the section about white performers were trying to stress was that successful white rappers contribute to a separation of hip hop artistry and aesthetics from the history and traditions of the music and culture (Ford, 2004; Scott, 2004). As Cruz pointed out, this is a standard trajectory of white appreciation of black art forms (separating music from its socio-cultural context) (Cruz, 1999). Scholars fear that much like Elvis and others did with the blues and rock and roll, artists like Eminem will make it that much easier to remove or ignore the inherent blackness of hip hop for white listeners. Scott focuses on how the critical acclaim for Eminem demonstrates the continued privileges (or possessive investment, as Lipsitz put it) of whiteness (Scott, 2004). Looking specifically at how he was acclaimed gives us insight into how this process might be taking place.

By focusing on his wordplay, cleverness, lyricism, etc. critics ignore the importance of the content of the lyrics. In so doing, they set a standard for what qualifies as “talent” for a rapper. This means that even when “talented” black rappers deliver a critique on the oppressed status of black Americans (a common theme in hip hop lyrics), they will be celebrated for their

artistry and not their social commentary. Therefore, the media can give its stamp of approval to hip hop and black rappers without extending this approval to blackness writ large. Whether white fans use this framework in their appreciation of hip hop corresponds to another public versus hidden transcript distinction.

In my survey, one of the few questions that required respondents to write a short response (as opposed to choosing from a drop-down list, or a simple yes or no) asked them what defined a good rapper to them. For the purposes of simplifying my results, I created three categories for their responses: those who stressed content or message as most important, those that focused primarily on creativity (or lyricism, flow, artistry, originality, etc.), and those who stated that both were important to them⁵. Of the twenty-three responses, eleven focused primarily on creativity, lyricism and technical ability; eleven mentioned both content or message and creativity or lyricism as important factors; and only one focused solely on the content or message the artist is trying to put forth. This would seem to indicate that creativity and artistry have become more important standards by which rappers are judged for white fans. However, it is important to note that more than half of the respondents did express that having content of substance was a central factor in defining a quality rapper.

Looking at my interview data further illuminates these figures. In response to the question about what content in rap appeals to them most, many interviewees discussed the importance of rappers being honest and personal. Generally, people stressed the importance of underground, conscious, or old school hip hop both in terms of exposing them to this more emotional and critical side of rap and in their development into more committed fans of the

⁵ Those respondents whose answers did not include either were omitted for the purposes of clarity.

music. However, they also acknowledged that they appreciated less thoughtful or conscious mainstream rap simply because it was fun or because they appreciated the artist's wordplay:

"I feel like a lot of rap that I listen to is kind of like literally just like rhymes that are meaningless. Like Lil Wayne doesn't really talk about much, but he's still a lyrical genius at times... And I do like conscious rap, like rap that is more emotional and vulnerable" (Jennifer).

It is important that we consider what is going on in this process. For most of my interviewees, their interest in more substantive or "conscious" rap helped build their appreciation of the genre as a whole and rap as a poetic form. This in turn allowed them to get into more mainstream or less thoughtful rap. However, sometimes the process would occur in the opposite direction where their exposure to and interest in mainstream rap led them to explore the wider expanses of the genre.

Still, the question remains: what kind of learning is taking place here? Is it simply an investigation in language or are the messages within the lyrics getting through as well? The answer is probably a little of both and it varies from person to person. One interviewee who is an aspiring emcee himself helps us to consider how language can be a democratizing force:

"I started to see what they were doing with language as less the product of a lifestyle or a conditional background and more the product of this interest in language and expression and sorta seemed to be more of a democratic art. And that's when I started participating was when I started seeing it in that light in this light that wasn't about who you are, but who you could be on the page or on the rap" (James)

This might seem at first to indicate that James is focusing on rap as a form and losing sight of the importance of the content. However, he was actually one of the most self-reflective and critical listeners that I interviewed. He explained to me, after we had finished the informal interview, that appreciation for rapping as a specific form of self-expression (through lyricism, word play, creativity, or what have you) can serve as an entry point into hip hop, but it certainly does not need to end there. Fascination with the art form leads to a desire to understand or grapple with

what the artist is saying, how he is saying it, and perhaps most importantly, the way in which how he is saying it informs what it is that is being said. In this way, interest in language and creativity can inevitably allow a listener to be exposed to and think critically about the message a rapper is trying to deliver.

However, I do not want to overstate the case. It was fairly clear that some of my interviewees and survey respondents were more concerned with form than function. The color-blind framework of the mass media and some music critics allows creativity to be used as a mask to obscure any critiques of white hegemony. For many white listeners, it is easier and more comfortable to view rap in these terms. This feeds into the phenomenon I discussed in the previous section in which white fans feel they are a part of or have an understanding of some part of black culture, simply because they appreciate an art form. However, learning about language from a black artist is not the same as learning about black culture, or learning about American culture and society through the eyes of the oppressed. In order for the latter to occur, one must listen actively, critically, and self-reflectively.

Learning from Each Other

While paying close attention to the content and themes in rap lyrics could help a critical white listener consider their own privilege and begin to grapple with the realities of social inequality, this is not the only way hip hop can teach us. As Kitwana helps us consider, raps multi-racial fan base might allow white listeners to develop a more realistic, multiple and less essentialist perspective on blackness. This is not only because one is exposed to many different perspectives from the black artists she is listening to, but also because she is more likely to interact with blacks and people of other races and ethnicities due to a common interest in the

music (Kitwana, 2005). The idea that taste and common interests bring people from different backgrounds (who might not have interacted otherwise) together was a common theme in my interviews. However, we might want to problematize this notion slightly and call into question the regularity of this occurrence because of conflicting forces like de jure forms of racial segregation.

As an abstract principle, learning from each other will definitely help break down prejudiced and stereotypical perceptions of other races. When we interact and see a range of personalities and experiences within a single racial group, it begins to break down overarching assumptions we might have made about the group as a whole. Almost all of my interviewees seemed to agree that taste—even particularly musical taste—is important in determining with whom you interact and develop relationships: “The reality is people make connections through music” (James). Many even shared specific experiences in which they were able to connect with their black peers over a common interest in rap. Even more encouraging is the fact that interest in hip hop influenced a couple of my subjects to get involved with groups like hip hop theater and hip hop 101 which strive to strengthen connections between Vassar (an institution peopled largely by the privileged) and the local Poughkeepsie community (which has much larger impoverished and minority communities). This kind of racial coalition-building is, on the whole, a positive force.

However, we must consider two important caveats before we fully laud hip hop for its ability to bring people from different races together and allow us to learn from each other in this way. First, one interviewee mentioned how although hip hop has perhaps made him want to interact with more people from different backgrounds, he does not feel he really has done it yet. He points to both his homogenously white hometown, and the fact that Vassar is a fairly white

and affluent institution as reasons why he still has not interacted with many non-whites despite his desire to do so:

“I don’t know that... I’ve actually made a conscious effort to get to know people of other backgrounds... but again I still haven’t really branched out from my home town. Vassar’s still a pretty affluent, a pretty white place, overall. So I think, reflecting on myself, I want to be able to say that I am attempting to really connect with people from those types of backgrounds, but I don’t think that I necessarily have” (Max)

Max helps us see that even if hip hop’s fan base is very multi-racial, that does not necessarily mean that people from different races will interact. As I discussed in chapter one, housing policy and quasi-racialized institutions such as prisons (housing disproportionate numbers of blacks and Hispanics) and the academy (still serving the white and affluent much more than impoverished minorities) create a modern form of segregation that prevents people from different races to interact. Even if a popular hip hop artist draws a multi-racial crowd at a concert, there is no reason to assume that people will branch out from the friend groups they came with to interact with people from different backgrounds. Many forces still stand in the way of hip hop building these racial coalitions.

Secondly, a kind of assumed inter-raciality of hip hop might feed into a sense that white hip hop fans have already done their part to fight racism (as we discussed in the second section of the chapter). One interviewee, in talking about how hip hop allowed him to make connections with his black peers, seemed to validate a color-blind assumption that this meant there was no difference between him and his black peers. In other words, hip hop fueled his mentality that *I can’t be racist; I have black friends*. Indeed, he claimed to have never met anyone he would consider a racist and that he believed that “all people are the same to me. Obviously, people look different, but I never have seen a black person and thought of them any different than a white person other than just that’s how they looked” (Henry). This is exactly the racism-without-

racists kind of attitude that ignores structural inequality, historical preservation of privilege and allows invisible forms of contemporary racism to persist. Perhaps, then, even when a white person interacts with non-whites and oppressed minorities, we cannot assume that means he is learning much from them.

Conclusion

By examining the different ways that white listeners learn from hip hop and the lessons hip hop may or may not be teaching them, we begin to see how certain listeners benefit from the alternative perspectives on American society within rap lyrics. However, the power of color blindness has allowed many listeners to overlook social commentary and given them an easy way out of recognizing their own culpability or complicity in continuing racial oppression. We might consider this dichotomy as color-blind listening versus active listening. Examples and trends from my data demonstrate that people fall in different places on the spectrum between these polar extremes (or engage in a bit of both) due to a wide range of factors. I had hypothesized that being a Vassar student would have a bigger impact on my subjects (pushing them in the direction of active listening) than it seems to have done. The following chapter will utilize my interview data to examine Vassar's relationship to hip hop (for the students themselves and more abstractly as an institution with hip hop-related clubs and curriculum). Looking at the interaction between a mainstream education and a hip hop education will help further elucidate how my subjects were able to come to different engagements with the messages contained in hip hop lyrics.

Chapter 4 – Learning *with* Hip Hop: Hip Hop and the Academy

I began explaining in the previous chapter how my subjects' education at Vassar played an important role in developing a more critical engagement with hip hop. As we saw, what one learns *from* hip hop depends on a number of factors, and education outside of hip hop is an important one among them. In this chapter we will examine the ways we learn *with* hip hop, meaning that our traditional education influences our hip hop education and vice versa. We can consider them parallel tracks with mutual influence, so even when we are learning outside the context of hip hop, we might still be learning with hip hop. This parallel learning is especially relevant when our traditional education involves an exploration of structural inequality and power dynamics (which is a common thread within the social sciences), but can also be applied to learning about English and the arts. This convergence of alternative and traditional forms of education is, on balance, a positive force, but this chapter will also examine how color-blindness and the nature of the academy can muddle this process or detract from its potential.

I will zero in on three trends from my interviews that deal with how my subjects felt they developed as critical listeners as a result of their Vassar education and the potential incompleteness of this development. First, I will look at how my subjects felt their education about social structure influenced their reading of hip hop (or vice versa). From there, I will examine how despite taking courses dedicated to analyzing hip hop, some subjects were able to maintain some level of color-blindness in their interpretation. Finally, I will assess the academy's adoption of hip hop as a legitimate field of study. Though learning with hip hop can be a great way for listeners to become more critical and reflective, the academy may not be the best space for this simultaneous learning to occur. Even though critical thinking is considered to be a top priority of a liberal arts education, it may not always be doing as good a job as it thinks

(especially when it comes to thinking critically about the academy itself as an institution and extension of the larger society).

Working Together: Vassar education and hip hop

In asking my subjects to reflect on their progression as hip hop fans, (or their journey with hip hop, as I phrased it in the question) I asked them to think specifically about how coming to Vassar might have had an impact. My expectation or hope was that they would express a sense that learning more about social structure, inequality, and generally gaining critical thinking skills had allowed them to recognize messages or themes in hip hop that paralleled or reinforced what they were learning in class. By and large, this was the response that I received, but as we saw in the previous chapter, it would be an oversimplification to assume that just because they all received a Vassar education, they were all automatically active, critical listeners and were no longer able to impose a color-blind lens onto their consumption of hip hop. Looking at how my interviewees characterize the importance of coming to Vassar in their “journey with hip hop,” can serve as a barometer for how they are engaging with the genre.

Some students expressed an explicit sense that hip hop had helped bolster an understanding of racial privilege that had been sparked by their academic courses:

“Being able to empathize and have a larger perspective regarding the importance of race and the different ways in which non-whites experience the world as opposed to myself as a white person. So being made more sensitive to the fact that my whiteness is not a naturalized universal condition and this has also gone hand in hand with what I’ve been talking and thinking about in academic classes, so it’s dovetailed nicely” (Steve).

For Steve, a Geography major who has spent a good deal of time considering structural inequality and power dynamics across space in his academic career, hip hop provided a kind of case study or real world example for the scholarship and theories he has read about. Others felt that their courses had made them more critical of negative representations that are present in rap

(such as homophobia, misogyny or treating women as merely sexual objects, masculinity being equated with violence). This was a more complicated process because many students felt that they were less able to ignore or condone these messages after learning to think more about how negative representations in pop culture can reinforce hateful behavior or thinking within the society that consumes them. However, most listeners admitted to still consuming and appreciating artists who present this kind of content from a more artistic or musical standpoint. This relates back to our discussion in Chapter 3 about creativity as a mask, only this time it is serving as a mask for negative representations. Some listeners, though, went a step further and tried to consider how hip hop cannot be solely blamed for these issues, because it is also a product of our society: “Lots of people like to [hate] on hip hop because they can blame it for so many different ills in society, but it’s a really uncomplicated view. Like hip hop has a lot of things wrong with it, but there is a larger social structure that informs hip hop” (Andrew). Misogyny and homophobia are allowed to persist in rap because they still exist in American culture, and the same is true for an obsession with violence and tying violence to masculinity. Moreover, violence is very present in the urban ghettos that produced many of these rappers, so discussing violence is merely an honest reflection of the way they grew up. However, most of my interviewees did not take this next step and remained in the territory of contradiction between their academic and intellectual opinions, which opposed these negative images, and their taste and enjoyment of the music that supported them.

Many students indicated that taking a course that focused specifically on analyzing hip hop had helped them to consider more actively about what they and other listeners might be learning from the music. Professor Kiese Laymon of the English and Africana Studies departments has taught multiple courses that involve thinking about hip hop and have students

writing their own raps. His courses are very popular, and as I mentioned in my methods section, I used them as a resource to reach out to students who might be interested in being a part of my study. As a result of this and the obvious fact that there is a lot of overlap between people who would be interested in taking a class on hip hop and participating in research about hip hop, all of my interviewees but one had taken at least one such course with Professor Laymon. Among the benefits students felt they had received from these courses were a more historically deep understanding of rap, viewing rap as a legitimate form of literary art (not low or street art), helping to develop an academic interest in race, and better contextualizing the music. While I view all of these as positive advancements for these students and important steps toward active, critical listening and consumption of hip hop, the next two sections will examine the degree to which college courses on hip hop alone do not necessitate this progression.

Maintaining Color Blindness

While Professor Laymon's courses involve a wide-lens exploration of hip hop as continuing a tradition of self-expression of marginalized black voices in America, some students view them primarily as an opportunity to write raps for a class. This parallels the idea brought up in the previous chapter of viewing rap in terms of artistry and as a lyrical form in order to ignore content and rap as a kind of (or space allowing for) social commentary. In both cases, listeners are maintaining color-blindness in their consumption and engagement with hip hop. Indeed, color-blindness demonstrates its power and flexibility as an ideology in the fact that many of the students who seemed to benefit from courses on hip hop in terms of helping them to engage critically with topics that challenge white supremacy and privilege, would make a color blind remark often within a few minutes of discussing how hip hop (and courses on hip hop) had allowed them to reflect on and acknowledge their skin privilege. This complicated,

contradictory process demonstrates how deeply ingrained color-blindness is in the overall consciousness of white America.

One student believed that he had very seriously invested himself in hip hop prior to coming to Vassar, so he did not feel coming to Vassar was very important in his journey with hip hop. The only thing he stressed as a positive influence of Vassar on his growth as a hip hop fan was the fact that it had enabled him to write verses and develop his abilities as an emcee (he had experimented with writing raps in high school, but only to a limited degree). For him it was very validating to be able to write and perform his raps for a college class: “hearing a college professor tell you that you could actually rap was kind of a cool thing” (Henry). His focus on bolstering his writing as opposed to his interpretative capabilities seems to echo the notion of using creativity and form to ignore content. Later on in the interview, when we were discussing how hip hop might have influenced his opinions about social structure or ideas about race, class, gender, etc., he made some comments that to me typify the dangers of color blindness:

“there are so many songs where I’ll listen and be like this is definitely not representative of my life... like I’m not black, and they’re talking about—in some songs—they’ll be like very “black power” like enforcing that... and there are songs that’ll be like “fuck white people, fuck Jews”... sometimes I’ll think about it for a second, I’ll be like “that kind of bothers me,” then I’m just like “eh.” I shrug it off. Like I enjoy the music, it’s not gonna stop me from enjoying the music... I’m not being personally offended by a lot of stuff. I don’t really get offended easily... [hip hop] has the potential to piss everyone off... no matter what the color of your skin is or what gender you are or anything, but if you’re not a super sensitive person... you can see the real positive aspects of hip hop” (Henry).

While he recognizes that the content in the music is not representative of his life, and even understands this in terms of racial identity, he fails to think critically about what would cause the artists to say the things they are saying. Instead, he focuses on the music, using that as a way to avoid thinking about the content. Moreover, he believes that the fact that he is able to ignore, overlook, or get past any anti-white messages in the music is something individualistic or inherent to him (he’s not “super sensitive”). Therein, he fails to recognize the importance of race

in his life, or more accurately, the fact that he has not had to confront the role race plays in his life and the lives of others is an important part of his white privilege that he completely overlooks. His ability to get past it is because his whiteness will never hold him back in life, so any anti-white messages while perhaps troubling for a moment, are ultimately immaterial. The final lines of this quotation reinforce the fact that he does not view race as an important factor in consumption of hip hop. Sometimes hip hop is offensive, but it is on you if you get offended; it does not have to do with “the color of your skin or what gender you are.”

Another student who was working through her color blindness discussed how taking a course on hip hop made the struggle and characters presented in rap music much more real to her. When she was younger, growing up in a very white privileged community, she felt her interest in hip hop was tied to a fascination with the foreignness of the music, but Professor Laymon’s course shifted her perspective:

“When we were reading Jay-Z’s Decoded, and I think it’s Big Daddy Kane who says, ‘rap is the CNN of the hood’ and that moment made like all of hip hop so much more of a reality to me... it was this much more clear representation than I guess was expecting or I was really digesting, cause I had always sort of seen it as this kind of fictional tale beforehand. And I think it does make you hyper aware of my own comfort” (Jennifer)⁶.

We see the direct benefit of taking a course on hip hop in that it forced her to recognize her privilege (or “comfort” as she puts it) and added a depth to her interpretation and consumption of hip hop. She added not long after, that she felt there was something inherently resistant in hip hop and part of its function is to “check the system.” However, a few minutes later, when we were discussing what she perceived the intended audience to be for the rap that she listened to, she intimated that she has felt hurt or insulted when artists claim that their music is not intended

⁶ The reader should note that Jay-Z’s book, Decoded, was one of the required texts for a course Professor Laymon teaches about Jay-Z. Additionally, it was actually Chuck D who said that “rap is the CNN of the hood,” not Big Daddy Kane.

for white audiences (she uses the example of rapper, Lauryn Hill making such claims in the 90s). Further, she informed me that when an up-and-coming black rapper refused an offer to play at Vassar's yearly hip hop show, Throwback Jam, because he "just didn't want to rock with like a bunch of privileged white kids" (Jennifer), that she felt this was racist. Here, color-blindness demonstrates its capacity for "perpetuating the inequalities it claims not to notice" (Rodriguez, 2006, 648). Although *learning with hip hop* allowed Jennifer to begin to reckon with her own privilege and view hip hop as resistant to dominant culture, she seems to remain unable to acknowledge the way in which her privilege supports this system of domination. If she recognized this, she would likely see why some artists have a negative opinion about white consumption of hip hop, and she certainly would not be able to label this kind of anti-white sentiment "racist." As Omi and Winant remind us, a history of oppression is one of the pre-requisites for the existence of racism, and there clearly is no such history for white Americans (Omi and Winant, 1994).

After nearly all my interviewees mentioned Professor Laymon's courses to me as important to their journey with hip hop, I felt it would be helpful to meet with him to discuss my findings. I especially wanted to hear his thoughts about how he viewed the courses he teaches about hip hop, specifically what he hoped his white students (generally the majority of the class, due in large part to the fact that Vassar's population is over 60% white) were taking away from the class. Since I had seen an array of responses from my interviewees about the benefits of his courses, and many of the students were working through varying degrees of color-blindness, I wanted to ascertain if he viewed fighting color-blindness as an important goal of these classes. He informed me that he was not interested in being a translator for his white students, and finding out what each person is hearing and learning from the music is important to his

pedagogy. However, when I informed him that some students, despite having taken his class, still felt that anti-white narratives in hip hop were not directed at them, specifically, he viewed this as a failure. He felt strongly that listeners should realize when they are being addressed. Indeed, he argued that being included and directly spoken to in an art form that was made originally by and for black Americans, is part and parcel of white privilege. Because whites are the dominant group in society, even music not originally intended for them, eventually has to address them directly. Even if this address is in negative terms, whites should recognize this as a privilege other marginalized groups do not share. While Professor Laymon may view his inability to get all of his students to recognize this as a personal or at least professional failure, the next section will examine the degree to which the academy as an institution is also culpable.

Hip Hop in the Academy

In his recent book, The Reorder of Things, Roderick Ferguson presents a framework and context that illuminates our understanding of the adoption and inclusion of hip hop studies by the academy—what we might, alternatively refer to as the canonization of hip hop. Though he does not address hip hop directly, he looks at how the academy is influenced both bottom-up (by social and political movements) and top-down (by capital and the state). He points out how radical social movements of the 50s and 60s (like the Civil Rights and Women’s Liberation Movements as well as many others) led to the creation of interdisciplines such as Africana Studies, Women’s Studies, Chicano Studies and more at many colleges and universities. While these new disciplines altered the academy and the canon by insisting on the inclusion of the voices of “the other” and foregrounding a knowledge of minority difference, the academy, in turn, altered or influenced the goals of the movements that created them. Due to the influences

of the state and capital, the academy replaced the goal of redistribution with a celebration of representation and inclusion. In other words, by adopting these disciplines, the academy was able to celebrate the goals of multiculturalism, diversity, and equality while doing little to challenge the realities of the continued marginalization of the women and minorities it purported to represent. Thus, Ferguson views the academy as a site that reflects social movements and trends while simultaneously influencing them in order to maintain the status quo (Ferguson, 2012).

We might recognize a similar process occurring with hip hop's growing acceptance and inclusion in the academy. As I discussed earlier, more and more courses investigating hip hop are emerging at colleges and Universities all over the country. Indeed, some rap artists are being courted by prestigious institutions to become guest lecturers or visiting professors. However, Gosa points out the supreme irony of this canonization of hip hop:

“The explosion of hip-hop in the academy has not coincided with positive educational gains for black men. While colleges race to analyze the street-born music, body movements, art, and poetry, the people whose images are most associated with hip-hop—young black men—continue to be left behind” (Gosa, 2013).

As was the case with the social movements of the 50s and 60s, we see that in adopting a contemporary cultural movement that strives for the betterment of oppressed minorities and some form of social redistribution, the academy has, in a way, pacified and de-radicalized hip hop. Once again institutions of higher education can celebrate their hip hop courses or departments as a display of continued attempts to include minority voices in the Ivory Tower. Meanwhile, they do nothing for the betterment of these communities and continue to support a status quo of inequality: “elite and resource-rich universities are failing to enroll those high-achieving students from disadvantaged schools and neighborhoods” (Gosa, 2013). Thus, by including or canonizing hip hop, the academy allows students privileged enough to be the

benefactors of its education to learn with hip hop, but fails as an institution to learn anything from it.

This theme is captured in my data more in terms of absence than in any snappy quotation or generalizable trends. When I discussed the courses my subjects had taken about hip hop or their perspective on Vassar's relationship to hip hop, no one mentioned a lack of black or minority students as problematic or contrary to the goals of hip hop. Virtually, no one mentioned the underrepresentation of blacks and other oppressed groups at the college at all. Only one student mentioned in passing that Vassar is a very white and privileged institution, on the whole. No doubt students in courses like Professor Laymon's (or other courses that deal with racial politics, epistemologies of the oppressed, knowledge of difference, etc.) would benefit greatly from a larger number of black and minority voices to diversify class discussion. Likely, if minority students were not so outnumbered in courses like these they would be empowered to speak up when they felt a white classmate was overlooking the importance race plays in the lives of all non-whites⁷. However, none of my interviewees felt that over-representation of white students in courses on hip hop was an issue or even really note-worthy. We may see, then how the college itself must be held, at least in part, responsible for students' ability to maintain color blindness despite their opportunity to learn with hip hop.

Conclusion

The academy (in this case, Vassar College) as a contested space between a liberal learning environment and an extension of capitalist power structures, plays an interesting and

⁷ This is just one overly simple example of the overall benefit of including more marginalized persons into the fold of the academy. Obviously a much more important goal is the increased overall social and economic equity among different racial groups. I merely used this example to point out how a student might conceptualize the benefits of having more minority peers in their courses.

often contradictory role in white hip hoppers' development as listeners. On the one hand, courses that analyze hip hop and other forms of popular culture, as well as those that teach students about structural inequality, power dynamics and contemporary racism can help students grapple with their white privilege and comprehend political or anti-hegemonic messages in hip hop. However, many students are able to maintain a color blind ideology in their consumption of hip hop despite having had the opportunity to learn with hip hop in this way. We can begin to comprehend this phenomenon by acknowledging that the academy exists as a space where cultural and social movements confront networks of power embodied by the state and capital. In this confrontation, the academy serves to curtail or dilute any radical messages within the movements that are being incorporated. Thus, the academy is able to support hip hop without acknowledging or attempting to incorporate the social group of its creators (blacks, predominantly black males). This, in turn, allows students to feel that they have knowledge of hip hop with a capital "K," (meaning knowledge that is validated by society's knowledge maker, the academy) even when they lack understanding of some of its more important messages and lack contact with the minority groups it was originally made by and for. The following chapter will speculate on the larger significance of my study as well as provide thoughts for future studies and application of my findings.

Concluding Remarks

Relevance

Due to the nature of this study as a portion of an undergraduate thesis and the associated time and resource constraints, there is little that is generalizable in my findings. I will not attempt to make any sweeping statements about all white hip hop fans, or even all white hip hop collegians. My relatively small sample size and the variation within my data would make any such statements seem overly ambitious or simply invalid. However, I do believe this thesis has advanced the academic discourse on white consumption of hip hop in a few important ways. First, it adds depth and complexity to existing notions of white potential in hip hop culture by demonstrating that white fans interpret hip hop content with varying degrees of color-blindness (some refuting this ideology entirely and recognizing the centrality of race both in hip hop and social inequality and hierarchy). Second, it provides theoretical illumination by beginning to conceptualize the ways in which certain individuals impose a color-blind reading on hip hop and others are able to look deeper and uncover the hidden politics within the lyrics. Moreover, I have examined how the academy can play a role in both sides of this dichotomy.

After having done this research, it is clear that hip hop does not force one to engage with its resistant or anti-hegemonic themes. It is an art form and all art forms are open to interpretation. Further, most of the resistant messages in contemporary hip hop (particularly that of the mainstream) is intentionally obfuscated by style, wordplay, swagger, braggadocio, slang, etc. In order to maintain its viability within a market controlled by the white elite, politically

radical or anti-hegemonic messages must not be overt⁸. However, most of my subjects expressed some sense that hip hop had helped them understand their more privileged background and made them more sensitive to the plight of urban minorities. While I am not claiming this is true of all white hip hoppers (indeed it was not even true of all of my subjects), it is still important to recognize and seek to understand how this is occurring.

I found that achieving a completely critical, active engagement with hip hop content required a long-standing and dedicated appreciation of the music (particularly, the content or lyrics), at least a relatively developed understanding or knowledge of social hierarchy and power dynamics, meaningful interactions with blackness and other minorities or less privileged groups outside of just listening to hip hop, and honest and exacting self-reflection. There may be more factors that I overlooked, but this combination of attributes seemed to translate to a keen awareness of hip hop's embedded social commentary as well as well thought out criticisms of some of hip hop's flaws (reproducing gender inequality, homophobia, providing negative images for young males by equating masculinity with violence, etc.) Most of my subjects had at least the first of these requirements, and all had at least one of them. However, missing any of them seemed to allow a listener to invoke color-blindness as a reflex to avoid responsibility for racial inequality or downplay its importance. It is hard to avoid this reflex, when one wishes to justify her appreciation or participation in a cultural movement that, in many ways, she has appropriated. However, using hip hop as a tool to illuminate the importance of race is, in my view, the best way to justify white participation.

⁸ While I believe this to be true, the waning influence of record labels caused by the increasing use of the internet to gain visibility and amass a fan base may lead to a change in this regard. The ascendance to stardom of rapper, Kendrick Lamar (considered to be one of the most promising young emcees in the game at the moment) might signal that this change is already in effect. His debut album, *Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City*, as well as his previous two mixtapes seem to meld the traditions of mainstream and conscious hip hop in an impressively seamless fashion.

We must recognize that hip hop contains the raw materials to develop a critique and understanding of racial hierarchy. Moreover, its ability to reach and connect with people across race gives it the potential to foster a more productive discourse on race that is not dictated by the dominant class. However, at present, hip hop is not being harnessed effectively enough to fully realize these potentials. It will be important going forward to see how the first of the requirements for active engagement I listed above can be utilized to further develop the latter three.

Thoughts for the Future

Though we have seen that hip hop's relationship with the academy can be problematic, I found, on the whole, that my interviewees benefited from taking courses that forced them to actively dissect hip hop content. It took their interest in hip hop (the first requirement listed above) and pushed them to think critically about what artists were trying to say and why, as well as think critically about themselves as hip hop fans (helping them to fulfill the second and fourth requirements listed above). While Professor Laymon may have viewed it as a failure that some of his students maintained a color blind framework for interpreting hip hop and seemed not to recognize their complicity in a white supremacist society, I would argue that the failure was not his. Having experienced his courses first hand, I know that he is always ready and willing to push back on a student that he feels is missing something important and he demands the respect and attention of his class. Therefore, his inability to teach them what he believes to be a valuable lesson goes beyond a lack of capability. To me, the failure occurred before Professor Laymon ever met any of his students, when they were proselytized in notions of color-blind equality and abstract liberalism their whole lives prior.

I have, therefore, come to the belief that the opportunity to experience this kind of learning-with-hip hop education needs to begin earlier. Because hip hop is so prevalent in popular culture, kids are already paying attention and many even have a strong interest or connection with the music. Therefore, hip hop could be a perfect tool to get students' attention and teach them about racial injustice, social hierarchy, and help them reflect on their role in this process. This education needs to start long before college when ideology can already be very deeply ingrained. Starting in middle or even elementary schools will help fight against the power of color blindness to dominate discourses on race.

As I mentioned in chapter three, hip hop has already been used as a successful educating tool for increasing literacy and interest in school generally for many “at-risk” or minority students. However, with hip hop’s broad, racially diverse appeal, the possibilities for hip hop’s application in education should be expanded. Alternative education programs that mirror the content of hundreds of hip hop courses taught at colleges and universities across the country (Gosa, 2013) (though obviously geared for a younger audience) could help take us a step closer to achieving a more racially equitable and socially harmonious society. Moreover, taking this kind of education outside the realm of the academy might limit the degree to which systems of power can alter and dilute its more resistant message. In fact, such programs need not exist within the system at all. Hip hop themed extra-curricular programs might be able to bring students of different races together and educate them about social structure, inequality and white privilege through the use of games, activities, creative projects, etc. Fostering these understandings and resistant ideologies at a young age would be much more effective at battling color-blindness and inequality more broadly.

Further Research

As I mentioned above, my study was necessarily limited (as it was an undergraduate thesis with no funding and a relatively small timeframe). Thus, I would recommend a few similar studies for the future that would provide more detail, relevance and clarity to the findings I have presented. First, I would recommend a study that is in essence the same as mine, but that has a larger sample size and a more diverse array of white listeners. This study would interview students from multiple different colleges (or perhaps provide a comparison between a larger university and a similar small liberal arts college). Additionally, it would include more students who are studying the sciences, as well as business or economics. A second study might ask a similar array of questions to high school students. This would highlight the differences in responses for a student before she is engaged in the more independent and critical style of pedagogy in higher education. Both studies would seek to gain more generalizable results and attain a more detailed conception of how different fans come to different types of engagements (color blind versus active).

Finally, I would recommend a study that asks similar questions but in reverse of black hip hop fans (i.e. what do they think about white/multi-racial consumption of hip hop, what do they think hip hop has taught them about themselves, why are they interested in hip hop versus why a white person might be interested). This would probably be the most interesting study because it would demonstrate either the congruence or disconnect between whites' and blacks' perspectives on hip hop as well as the role of whiteness in hip hop. It has often been argued that blacks must understand the white experience in America as well or better than whites know and understand it themselves, because part of white privilege is the naturalization and normalization of this experience. Whiteness is privileged in academic settings and the performance of white identity

is also important for gaining employment as well as many other important benefits in society. The comparison between a study that focuses on black listeners and white listeners would provide valuable insight into how well each group understands notions of whiteness and white privilege.

Zooming Out

For the first nearly one hundred years of this country's existence (and many years before we became an independent nation), white property owners could legally own black slaves. Blacks were not recognized as humans, but were instead treated as property from which one might profit. Finally, in the mid nineteenth century we fought an extremely bloody and gruesome civil war that resulted in the legal abolition of the institution of slavery. Today, we commonly view slavery to be a detestable mark on our nation's history.

For a hundred years after slavery was legally abolished, black Americans (as they were now allowed to be called) were denied many basic civil liberties and were not allowed in half of the country to mingle or associate with whites in public spaces. Blacks were considered second class citizens and public lynching and beating of blacks was relatively commonplace, particularly in certain parts of the country. White perpetrators of these heinous crimes, when convicted, would routinely go unpunished. Then in the 1950s and 60s, the brave actions of the Civil Rights Movement led inevitably to the passage of black suffrage, and end to legal racial segregation and other major forms of racial discrimination.

In the past fifty years, reactionary legal policy and color-blind ideology has served to maintain the subordination of the majority of America's black population. Blacks are disproportionately incarcerated, impoverished, victims of police brutality and racial profiling,

victims of violent crime, and more as I have discussed earlier in this thesis. It is my sincere hope that it does not take another fifty years before we take another step forward toward greater racial equality in this country. If there is a chance that hip hop holds the answer to or can play an important role in ending de jure forms of segregation and racial oppression in this country (as I have argued it can), then we must seek to harness its potential as effectively as possible. This thesis has attempted to play a small role in determining how this can be achieved. Despite having been derided and oppressed for literally the entirety of our nation's history, black culture has been ever-resilient. It has given us a rich and beautiful musical heritage (virtually all forms of American music, at least stem from black cultural foundations). It is time to stop appropriating and stealing this music, and start using it as a tool in the fight for equality.

Epilogue and Reflections

Writing this thesis has truly been a culminating experience in my Vassar education. Being able to design my own study and learn from my peers about a subject that is very close and important to me was a great privilege. Particularly through my research on the history of hip hop and through my interviews and reviewing (and re-reviewing) those interviews, I was able to learn a great deal about how I view hip hop and the way I understand myself as a white hip hop fan. It has become more than a genre of music that I am passionate about. Through my work on this thesis, I gained the interest and motivation to join Hip Hop Theater, which has, in turn inspired me to get involved with working with under-privileged students after college. In an ideal world, I would be able to get a job doing the kind of hip hop pedagogy style activism that I described in my conclusion after I graduate next month. However, even if I am not, I plan to get involved with education and community organizing in an under-served community. Wherever that may be, I am certain to take what I learned from this thesis with me, and attempt to utilize hip hop as a tool for educating and fighting inequality however I can.

Appendix A – Survey Questionnaire

The reader should note that my surveys were all done online. However, the questions below reflect a very close approximation of what the students completing the surveys online were looking at.

1. How old are you? (Write in a number)

2. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other (do not wish to specify)

3. Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one.)

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Asian / Pacific Islander

Black or African American

Hispanic American

White / Caucasian

Other (Please Specify)

4. What is your major or primary area of academic interest? (write-in)

5. Did you grow up in an urban, rural, or suburban community?

Urban

Rural

Suburban

Other (please specify)

6. How would you describe the racial make-up of your home community?

predominantly white

very racially diverse

primarily non-white

other (please specify)

7. What do you estimate is your family's average yearly income?

\$0-\$50,000

\$50,000-\$100,000

\$100,000-\$150,000

\$150,000-\$200,000

\$200,000+

8. At what age did you first start listening to rap? (Write in a number)

9. Which types or sub-genres of rap do you prefer?

Conscious Underground Gangsta Mainstream

Instrumental Hyphy Hardcore Horrorcore

Other (please specify)

10. What defines a good rapper (e.g. style, originality, flow, message, lyricism, etc.)? (Write in a relatively brief response)

11. Who are a few of your favorite rappers? (write in response)

12. Are you involved in activism at all?

Yes No

13. Would you be interested in doing an in-depth interview that further explores the relationship between whiteness and involvement with hip hop?

Yes No

Appendix B – Interview Questions

Because my interviews were semi-structured in nature, it is impossible to provide an exact replication of the questions I asked in each interview. The questions I asked changed slightly depending on the subjects and their responses throughout the interview. That said, the following questions reflect what I was looking at while giving the interview. The questions have been divided into four sections, just as the interviews were. Each section has been marked with a heading for the purpose of clarity. Questions that are preceded by an open circle and have been double-indented were follow-up questions that were common, but not universal among the interviews.

Personal journey with hip hop

- Where do you think your interest in rap/hip hop came from? What originally attracted you to the music?
- How has your interest changed (particularly since coming to Vassar)?
 - o Were there any other important moments that changed your perception or interaction with hip hop?
- What are your parents' feelings about hip hop?

Awareness of social critique in raps

- What topics or subject matters in rap interest you the most?
 - o Has hip hop influenced your perceptions or opinions about social structure (issues of race, gender, sexuality? OR: Do you think hip hop is resistant, and how so?
 - o What do you think about representation related to gender in hip hop?
- What do you find useful and/or problematic about contemporary hip hop?

Understanding of self and other whites in hip hop

- Has your engagement with hip hop influenced your own identity?
 - o Who do you think is the intended audience (if any) for the rap music you listen to?
- What do you think about white engagement and consumption of hip hop? Why are people interested?
 - o Is this similar or different from your understanding of yourself as a hip hop fan?

Interactions with blackness outside of hip hop

- For people who come from more homogenously white home communities: was hip hop one of your first and/or only interactions with blackness growing up? What do you think it taught you about blackness? How did it affect the way you viewed your home community if at all?
- For people from more multi-racial/ethnic home communities: how did your perception of your minority peers relate to your perception of blackness in hip hop?
- Has hip hop influenced you to make connections with people from different background as you? Or has it allowed you to (not necessarily a deliberate choice)?
 - o Are you involved in activism of any kind? How is this related (if at all) to your engagement with hip hop?

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